

EDUCATION INTERRUPTED: KOSOVO 1980-1999

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ABSTRACT: The period between 1980 and 1999 was one of interruption of education for Albanian students in Kosovo. Serbian students were allowed to attend school, which was now taught in the Serbian language that excluded Albanians. A parallel system of education evolved in which secret house-schools were established in order to educate Albanian speakers in their own language. This study recounts the time through the eyes of students, teachers, and others involved in education during this period. The paper describes measures undertaken to restore education of Albanians in Kosovo, implications for the future, and a caution to keep in mind.

Keywords: house-school, Kosovo, primary education, secondary education

The area formerly known as Yugoslavia (now Balkan region) consisted of several states: Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, which includes the province of Kosovo. It is a region with a complex mix of languages, religions, and ethnic groups. At the end of the two-decades of interest, Kosovo was the poorest and most densely populated area of the former Yugoslavia with approximately 2 million residents. Ninety percent of them were Albanian, and the rest were mainly Serbs, each speaking a distinct language. The Serbian language is closely related to the Slavic languages spoken in the other states, but the Albanian language is not related to the Slavic languages (Andryszewski, 2000).

For the past 1,500 years, the region has had periods that were peaceful interspersed with many conflicts between the various groups. After the end of World War II, Marshal Tito became the leader of a reunited Yugoslavia. Through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Tito managed a balancing act that avoided much ethnic conflict, even for minorities living in areas dominated by other ethnic groups. Kosovo itself was considered an autonomous zone within the Serbian region of Yugoslavia. A new constitution was passed in Yugoslavia in 1974 that specifically guaranteed Albanian rights and limited self-government in Kosovo. But after Tito's death in 1980, the old ethnic conflicts re-emerged. In 1989, Slobadan Milosevic was the most powerful politician in Serbia. He ended the semi-independence of Kosovo and made the people completely subject to Serbian rule (Andryszewski, 2000; Buja, 2011). From this time onward, conflicts escalated throughout the Balkan region, eventually culminating in outright war. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), with the support of NATO and the Albanian army eventually prevailed and Serbs completely withdrew from Kosovo. The 15-month war had left thousands of civilians killed on both sides and over a million displaced. Although Kosovo gained its freedom in 1999, the impact of two decades of conflict on Kosovar Albanians was dramatic and dire.

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The purpose of this paper is to share with the international community how the political developments in the former Yugoslavia, with emphasis in Kosovo, during the 19-year period between 1980 and 1999 impacted education. This paper will present some key events that occurred during 1980-1999 and describe Albanians' efforts over decades of

struggle to be educated in their language. The goal of this study is to present the challenges in education of Albanians in Kosovo during the former Yugoslavian /Serbian oppression in Kosovo. This research will bring to the US and international audience some experiences and perceptions about education during the period between years 1980-1999, as well as some of the challenges and consequences that influenced young peoples' lives in Kosovo. The research will address the questions of how education evolved during that time and the consequences that continue to impact Albanians in Kosovo even today.

Method

Context and positionality are important in qualitative research. This study originated from a class discussion in an adult education doctoral program in which the first author was enrolled and the second author was the facilitator. The first author is a citizen of Kosovo and certified by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in Kosovo as a translator. One night she was describing to her class colleagues how education was interrupted by war during her youth. She mentioned that after the war ended, some people whose education was interrupted did not return to school because they were too busy "just celebrating being alive." Kosovo has a generation of young adults who missed some of their education and the country is now trying to decide how to respond.

In addition to the lived experience of the first author, this paper presents the experiences and stories of others who lived in Kosovo during that time. The first author conducted interviews with individuals who were directly affected by the challenges they faced as students, teachers, and government officials who were engaged in educational processes in Kosovo. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and via electronic mails with questions related to the period of 1980 through 1999. This research is grounded in social constructionist theory in which "the construction of knowledge is viewed specifically as a result of our experience with human practices that prompt understanding, which inherently vary from individual to individual" (Egbert & Sanden, 2014, p. 22).

Participants

Eight participants—four males and four females—were interviewed for this study. Traditional Albanian names have been assigned to them as pseudonyms. Four of them now work at the Kosovo Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Three of the men (Agron, Besnik, and Trim) and two of the women (Shpresa and Besa) were students during that period. Agron is now a senior official at the Ministry for the Kosovo Security Forces. Besnik is now a male nurse. Trim is from the capital of Prishtina, but now lives and works in Switzerland. Shpresa is also from Prishtina and is now a professor of pedagogy who also works at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Besa is

now a psychologist, and during the period under study, her family offered their house for use as a school. The remaining three participants were educators during this period. Agip was a school principal, and today he is a professor of the Albanian language and also the head of the Agency for Adult and Vocational Education within the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Ermina was a teacher in a primary school in Prishtina. Her father was Albanian and her mother was Croatian. She is now an official at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Finally, Elmase is a Bosnian woman living in Prishtina who is now an official at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. During the period under study, she was teaching the Serbian language in a primary school in Prishtina. Her husband is an Albanian who lost his job. Their children were considered to be Albanian and were not allowed to attend the school where she was a teacher; rather, they had to attend a house-school.

Two Decades of a Parallel Universe in Kosovo

The period from 1980 until 1999, when Kosovo was officially a Serbian-run state, was a time of parallel existence especially with regard to government and education. Albanians boycotted the new Serb government that evolved under Milosevic and supported an unofficial government run by ethnic Albanians. Thousands of Albanians were fired from their jobs, and many others quit in protest. Although this paper will describe some general conditions and experiences, the focus will be on education.

The impact on education was also dramatic and dire; it also resulted in a parallel universe. Although higher education was affected and the faculty and students of the University of Prishtina were active participants in the struggles, theirs was a story of political activism. Those students already had completed many years of education, even if their higher education was interrupted. This paper focuses more on primary and secondary education for two reasons. First, the Albanian author was in the cohort of younger students whose education was interrupted, and she has the lived experience of alternative schools. Second, the students who were in primary and secondary school during the conflict are the ones who ended up with a suboptimal educational experience and no educational credential.

Until 1992 schools in Kosovo were a place where all communities learned together in cooperation and peace: then, suddenly, in September of 1992 this changed. According to Agim, who was a school director at the time, this was when “Serbians took off their mask,” dismissed the leadership from schools, and forced the teachers to use Serbian curricula. As students and teachers waited for the doors to open at the start of the new school year, the doors did not open for Albanian students. Albanian teachers and students were not allowed to enter the school buildings. Besa reported that even as young children, they realized that the situation was worsening and becoming frightening. Elmase cried as she recalled Serbian police throwing gas so that Albanian students could not enter the school. This was when fate divided these Albanian students from students of other communities. Shpresa noted that the social divisions with other ethnic groups did not happen right away. At first they still greeted each other, but day by day the Albanian and Serbian children quit speaking to each other.

Serbs banned use of the Albanian language in schools, both in the classroom and also in textbooks and other resources.

To deny someone the right to speak in her/his own language is the first step toward his/her denial as a political factor. The inequality of citizens in the sphere of the use of native language in education implies the reduction of the rights in the field of culture. Language and culture are inseparable factors. (translated from Osmani, 2009, p.13)

Because other ethnic communities like Turks, Bosnians, and Serbs accepted the mandatory curriculum in Serbian, they were allowed to enter the school and continue to have their education financed by the state. They enjoyed all the rights of children for a normal education and a normal childhood and life. They had classes with all the equipment for a normal learning environment, labs and offices for staff, heating, transportation, parents who worked and did not have financial difficulties. Most importantly, their lives were safe. On the other hand, Albanians were left outside the schools, and their future was in the hands of fate.

In some schools, especially in the capital of Prishtina, Albanian students continued to use school facilities where Serbian students and students of other ethnic backgrounds studied. There were some changes regarding the division of classes. Although Serbian students were few in number, they had a larger classroom space and all the offices, laboratories, and equipment. Although Albanians made up the majority of students, they were only allowed to use a small classroom space in the school building. Due to the lack of classrooms, lessons for Albanian students were organized in several shifts. Classes were shortened from 45 minutes to 35 or even 30 minutes in order to create time and space for other Albanian students in the school.

The Dismissal of Albanians from Jobs and its Effects on Education

Another obstacle to education were the severe economic conditions. Dismissal from jobs of all Albanians created an economic crisis for Albanian families. This situation was impacting Albanian families; most parents were unemployed, without any financial income. Each day that they left their houses to try to get a job or work in the market put them at risk of harassment or harm from Serbian police. It was difficult to afford everyday living expenses and paying students' expenses was almost impossible. Often families were unable to provide even clothing for their children to go to school.

Agim remembered that "there were lots of attempts to bring some books from Albania or print somewhere in Kosovo, but they were caught by the Serbian police and all text books were torn, burned, and demolished." Most students could not afford to buy the few books that were available in the Albanian language. Since books were not available, students depended on pens and notebooks as their only supplies. Albanian teachers were the first to be dismissed from their jobs by Serbian police but were so dedicated to teaching students that they were organizing classes, even without pay. This injustice toward Albanian teachers and students attracted international attention. The American Federation

of Teachers was one of the international organizations that protested against this injustice, and the head of the American Federation of Teachers wrote a letter to the president of Serbia:

On behalf of 790,000 members of the American Federation of Teachers we request a stop to discrimination against Albanian people. We are writing to you to protest for the systematic repression against Albanian schools in Kosovo and human rights of Albanian people in Kosovo. We are shocked that your government closed hundreds of schools in Kosovo since November of 1991, closed all secondary schools in the Albanian language and dismissed thousands of Albanian teachers, which violates the fundamental right of gathering and expression. We know that about 21.000 teachers are without personal income, whereas 450.000 pupils and students were denied the right to be educated in their native language. This repression against Albanian education in Kosovo violates the international covenants that guarantee cultural autonomy to Kosovo, a covenant that is signed by the government of Yugoslavia, as well. On behalf of 790,000 syndicated members of the American Federation of Teachers we request a stop to discrimination against Albanian people and to fully respect the right of educational authorities in Kosovo to reopen their schools and universities with respective funding for this activity. (Osmani, 2009, p. 97)

In addition, the “European Conference of World Confederation of Organizations for the Teaching Professions (CMOPE) held in Geneva condemn[ed] all discriminatory and segregation provisions by Serbian authorities against the Albanian language and people that comprise 90% of Kosovo’s population” (Gashi (2014, p.144). This advance led to a mobilization of Albanian people in Kosovo and in the diaspora. Families began to help each other; students helped each other students, sharing textbooks and notebooks. At the same time the Albanian government in exile was mobilizing Albanians around the world to help Albanian families and schools in Kosovo. Later, the government in exile provided a "salary" or modest stipend for teachers in the amount of 20 German marks per month, which was later increased to 40 German marks per month. Regardless of all these difficulties teachers were determined to continue to work without pay in order to keep the learning process continuous. It was patriotic work, because these teachers believed that they were carrying on their shoulders the fate of an entire nation. Their sacrifices in those days were the contribution that they gave to the foundation of the state of Kosovo.

Poisoning of Albanian Students in Primary and Secondary Schools

In some schools, especially in the capital, Albanian students continued to use school facilities where students of other ethnic backgrounds as well as Serbian ones learn. There were some changes regarding the division of classes. Although Albanians made up the majority students, they were only allowed to use a small classroom space in the school building. Serbian students, although few in number, kept for themselves a larger space and all the offices, laboratories, and equipment. Thus, in the absence of classrooms, lessons for Albanian students were organized in several shifts where classes were shortened from 45 minutes to 35 minutes and in some cases even 30 minutes in order to leave space to other students to learn in that school. Ermina, who was a primary school

teacher at the time remembered that one day she was sharing the same meeting room and table with Serbian colleagues, when suddenly she was relocated to teach Albanian students in the basement, while her colleagues were still teaching in normal classes. Ermina claimed that they continued to share the same school building because they were in the center of Prishtina and the authorities “still wanted to show to the international community and media that everything was normal in Kosovo.”

Separating Albanian students from Serbian students and students from other nationalities was another way for Serbian Secret Police to continue the violence and terrorism towards Albanians.

During the period of March and June of 1990 there were 7,000 people of Albanian nationality poisoned by the “mysterious” poison by the Serbian Secret Police. Also they were not allowed to be hospitalized because as the Serbian authorities said “they were faking and that was a hysteria of the Albanian nationalists.” Even Serbian doctors refused to accept Albanians as patient which goes against the doctor’s professional ethics. Furthermore, Serbian doctors were accusing Albanian doctors that were helping Albanians for “acting”—because according to the Serbs, the Albanians were not poisoned. People who were poisoned were mostly secondary school students, but there were also primary school students, children from 4-9 years old, and the majority of all poisoned students were females. Some of the symptoms of this poison were headaches; hallucinations and feelings of close death; nightmares; dizziness; weakness; suffocation; muscle pain; eye, throat and nose burns; diarrhea; hypertension; flushed face; coughing; dried lips; and photophobia. All these were denied by the Serbian authorities, only to be proven by international experts. The director of the International University Reference Laboratory found out that young people of Kosovo were poisoned with the military nerve agents sarin and tabun. The British investigative documentary *World in Action* found out that the poisonous nerve gas was produced by the Yugoslav Populist Army and was used in 1990 to poison thousands of Albanian students. (translated from Gashi, 2014, pp. 55-57)

Agim claims that “even today people suffer the consequences of that poison.”

House-Schools

Although students in the capital of Prishtina were sometimes able to use a small portion of the existing schools and attend school in shifts, this was not the case in other cities and in rural villages of Kosovo. Creating an independent, parallel education system for Albanians was needed and the organization of learning outside teaching facilities had begun. As Kojçini-Ukaj (1997) noted: “Massive education and schooling of a nation is the best form and way of preserving the identity, and rise of a nation’s awareness, as well” (p. 5). The unprecedented commitment of Albanian intellectuals, parents, and teachers together enabled schooling for Albanian children to continue even outside the school buildings, although in extremely difficult conditions. Families offered their homes to be transformed into classrooms. Some gave the entire house to be used as a school,

some several rooms, or just a room, depending on the space that they had. Thus one class of students would go to one house, while another class went to a home in another neighborhood. Trim reported that for safety reasons house-schools were usually on the outskirts of the city in less frequented areas. Besa's family provided two rooms and she noted that for an entire year her bedroom became her classroom, with a blackboard and places for 20 students to sit. Elmase recounted that "in a room of 3.5-4.5 meters squared learned 45 students who had to write on each other's backs."

The safety of children was another concern of teachers, parents and house owners. Albanians were constantly threatened and harassed by Serbian forces operating in Kosovo. According to Shatri (2010) the home owners would do their best to protect teachers and students from Serbian police (p. 63). While students were in class, someone (usually the home owner) would stay outside in case police came to check the houses. In those cases, the home owner would run and try to hide children in closets of the house. They would hide the students' shoes so that it would appear to police that there was only the family staying there. But the home owners themselves were at risk. Trim reported that if the Serbian authorities found that someone had offered their house as a school for Albanian students, and added "the owner of the house then would be arrested, physically and mentally maltreated, and condemned [sic] with money or jail. This also happened to teachers in most cases."

There were many factors to be considered that made teaching and learning an everyday challenge. An attempt was made to transform the space into classrooms, but these were residential rooms not made for classrooms. Classrooms were too small and there were often no seats; students sat on the floor. Shpresa remembers having seats in the house-school but the students fell from them because the seats were old and broken. Trim noted that there were no labs for practice and experimentation. The classrooms often did not have tables, blackboards, or heat in winter. In some places there was no electricity especially in villages where the population was Albanian (Shatri, 2010, p. 63).

Since Albanian books and textbooks were banned by the Serbian authorities, this was another challenge for teachers and students. There were only two Albanian language books that were printed in 1995 for the first and second year of the secondary education (Shema, 2000). Even though they were not expensive, not everyone could afford them. For other subjects there was no literature in the Albanian language. Therefore, teachers had to gather materials from different books and from literature in other languages and translate them to the Albanian language. Then the challenge was how to give all that material to students. Most students could not afford to print all the materials for classes, and there was the problem of where to print these materials without being noticed by Serbian police. The only way to transmit information was for the teacher to dictate the material and for the students to take notes. The first author remembers how class started; when the professor entered the room she would just start reading from her notebook and the students all wrote as fast as we could to take all the notes. We would write for the entire class period, for 30-40 minutes, and then the class was over. There was no time for discussions in class, because there was no time to take the notes and discuss them in one class. Also, not all students could write very fast, so some could not keep up with the dictation and get all the notes. Therefore, the students had to share their notes to see if

someone got the whole sentence so we could complete the notes and then learn the material. Lacking chairs and tables in class, students used to sit in rows on the floor and used a friend's back as a table on which to write. In some rooms there were benches where five or six students would sit in one bench. It was impossible to write, especially when a student was left-handed, without bumping another student's arm.

The difficulty of the learning process in class was nothing compared to the road from school to home and vice-versa. In spite of the challenges, Ermina believes that "learning in so-called house schools wasn't traumatic but the violence from Serbian police in those schools was something that traumatized children at that time." Besa remembered that students were told to be attentive to their surroundings and not to carry school bags that would identify them as students. Shpresa reported that students had to hide their notes under pants and t-shirts in order not to be caught by Serbian police, as they never knew when they would be stopped. Besnick talked about being stopped by the police. When they found his student ID and grade register, they tore it from him then abused him physically and psychologically. Trim confirmed that if Serbian police found textbooks or notebooks they would physically abuse the student in the street and tear up and destroy the notebooks and books. Agron also reported physical and psychological maltreatment by Serbian police and was unable to complete his secondary education. Ermina told of colleagues in other cities facing more difficulties during that time "as they were constantly arrested, physically maltreated in front of their students." Agim, the school director, was called and interrogated by the Serbian police seven times. He cried as he recounted how hard it was for him and especially for his family and "it was too much for students to see me get arrested and maltreated in front of them."

Another difficulty that children faced during this time was traveling to school during winter time. As Trim noted, there was no public transport at the time. In the absence of public transport children walked to schools on rainy days and in winter, so when they arrived in class they were all muddy and wet from the rain and snow. Shpresa remembered changing socks in class because their old shoes allowed the rain to get their socks wet. In some houses there was heat with wood. While students stood in class they dried their clothes and shoes to wear again to return home. Some house-schools did not have heat, so students wore the same wet clothes and shoes until the end of the school day. Often the children stayed in school without food and drink because their parents could not afford it. In some cases, during cold weather the homeowners offered tea to students and teachers.

But no matter how parents and students were trying to keep students in schools, other circumstances were leading them to another direction. Day by day students were missing in school, especially in secondary and in higher education. According to Shpresa, her friends from primary school were able to continue their education and have good careers, but her male friends from secondary school had to stop attending school and their children did not know where they went. One severe reason for the disappearance of the male schoolmates was the economic situation and the violence by the Serbian government. According to Shatri (2010) by the end of school year 1991/1992 Serbian police maltreated 3,250 educational professionals, about 300 children/students and tens of parents, (p.91). Therefore, a lot of families had to leave Kosovo hoping for a better life in the European Union, the United States, and beyond. Albanian graduates had difficulty

finding jobs, and many young people left the country. After the war ended, Shpresa used social media such as Facebook to find the male friends who had left secondary school. Those she found told her that they had gone to European countries and found jobs in different fields—but they never continued their education.

It is difficult to describe in words the commitment, willingness and eagerness to learn and to educate children in those conditions, hoping for a better future. Besa said that the parallel system made them socially responsible because “the entire Albanian community was responding positively to every need the teachers and students had in order to support [the] education of future generations.” In retrospect Elmase recounted that “it was worth sacrificing for that generation and for education.” She told the story of her son, who went to study in Austria. When his professors asked where he did his schooling, he returned to Prishtina, took a picture of his house-school and sent it to his professors, telling them “here is where I finished my secondary school.” Shpresa expressed gratitude and respect for the people who allowed house-schools in their homes. “They became part of our educational journey...we recall them with the highest respect and they always join us in anniversaries of the school and cohorts. They were one of us.” Agim noted:

I believe that teachers gave a special contribution at that time. A decade out of legitimate school buildings and being educated in these conditions, did not stop education of Albanians, but I have to admit that the quality of education was impacted from the lack of proper educational institutions. Still, people got educated and I think these hard times helped raise awareness as a nation, and those students of that time were the ones that formed Kosovo Liberation Army and fought against Serbian military forces in 1998-1999. Due to all these developments lots of students had to stop schooling. I want to mention here that even during the war, where peoples were standing on refugee camps teachers organized classes to keep children engaged and not to stop schooling. After the war most of those students who were in Kosovo stopped schooling during 1990-1998. They continued their non-formal education, but unfortunately this didn’t happen with those who had to emigrate. There is a lot to say for that period.... And it is very touching as we had to live through hard times ... but, I want to add that that period of ten years left a multidimensional stamp on Kosovo, and on Albanians’ lives.

Implications

Since the war ended in 1999, there has been a renewed focus on education in Kosovo. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as UNICEF are analyzing education in Kosovo at the primary and secondary level (Wenderoth & Sang, 2004). Academics from the University of Prishtina have partnered with universities in other countries such as the United Kingdom (Bache & Taylor, 2003) to reconstruct higher education in Kosovo. In addition, the Kosovo Ministry of Education is exploring options for the lost generation whose education was interrupted. The first author, who is employed by the Ministry of Education, is in the United States learning how the General Educational Development (GED) tests used in the United States and Canada as a high school equivalency diploma might serve a similar purpose in Kosovo. These GED tests measure proficiency in science, mathematics, social studies, reading, and writing. But Bache and Taylor (2003)

warn that it is imperative to understand the local context in order to avoid “the ‘Frankenstein’ syndrome...which they believed had developed in other post-Communist states. This was the inappropriate adoption of practices from elsewhere...” (p. 285) that became dysfunctional in the new setting.

The tears shed by the participants of this study recounting their stories of the years between 1980 and 1999 make it clear that there has been a long-lasting impact on their lives. We do not know how long that impact will last for them or for future generations. Recent research suggests that the trauma imposed on Holocaust survivors (Thompson, 2015) and Native Americans may be affecting them at a cellular and genetic level (Pember, 2015). The relatively new scientific field of epigenetics is exploring the effects of intergenerational trauma. The 1,500 year history of conflict in the Balkans, and the ensuing effect on education, could potentially have results similar to intergenerational trauma.

A study done in Kosovo in 2011 found that elderly people in Kosovo has a low educational level and that almost half of respondents perceived themselves as poor or extremely poor (Jerliu, Toçi, Burazeri, Ramadani, & Brand, 2012). The researchers concluded that “demographic trend coupled with the economic and political transition raise serious concerns about increasing needs for socioeconomic support of elderly people in Kosovo” (p. 8). If the Ministry of Education is able to devise a credentialing system that recognizes the learning that occurred in house-schools, it may prevent this cycle of poverty from continuing.

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